

History Research Center

machismo and marianismo in Latin America

Gender construction in Latin America has often been cited as being significantly influenced by Spanish colonization. Dominant conceptions of masculinity and femininity, referred to as machismo and *marianismo* respectively, are rooted in the Spanish conquest and influence the sociocultural conditions of Latin America. There is debate as to the relationship, relevance, changes, and influences of the extremes of machismo and marianismo.

Machismo Defined

Machismo is a form of masculinity that asserts the dominance and superiority of males in society. The term is traced to the Spanish word *macho*, which means "male" or "manly." It could also refer to being courageous, valorous, and having gender pride. Although these may be positive connotations, the term *machismo* is used negatively referring to extreme masculinity encouraged by structures in society. Male dominance and superiority are further legitimized by cultural values and norms.

Machismo is characterized by hypervirility or aggressive masculine behavior expected of males in Latin societies. The machos embody physical strength, courage, self-confidence, heightened sexual power, and bold advances toward women.

Machos believe in the superiority of men over women and also adhere to conservative gender roles. The men, for example, can seek extramarital affairs while the women are expected to be faithful. Women do not have the right to participate in traditionally male positions in society. Men occupy the public sphere—the arena of politics, economy, or military—and women occupy the private sphere. Women are expected to stay at home and attend to the needs of their husband and children, to take care of the housework, and to oversee other domestic needs. The main roles of women are to be mothers and wives.

Historical Context

The origins of machismo in Latin societies come from Spanish traditions. Patriarchy emphasizes nobility, chivalry, swordsmanship, horsemanship, and formal education. Ties with nobles and crusaders are also given great importance.

In Mexico, the origins of machismo are also associated with the Spanish conquest and the [conquistadores](#)' exploitation of natives. This is the period in Mexican history when Hernán Cortés and the conquistadores set out to convert indigenous populations. The image of the conquistador, who courageously conquered despite being outnumbered, is retained as the prototype of the modern macho male.

Likewise, the colonial economic system inculcated a dichotomized sexual division of labor. Men and women existed in separate social spheres.

Archetypes of Machismo

Author and researcher R. A. Andrade summarizes the four archetypes of machismo that can be found in scholarly and popular literature: the conqueror macho, the playboy macho, the masked macho, and the authentic macho. The conqueror macho exemplifies invincibility and extreme bravery in facing dangerous situations. Exaggerated sexual potency is one of the characteristics of this archetype. Examples of conqueror machos are gunslingers, or *pistoleros*. Conqueror machos are generally ruthless and bloodthirsty, and they demand power and break laws. They are the negative sides of this archetype.

The playboy macho illustrates males who are permitted to act in a sexually aggressive manner toward females. Sexual, physical, and mental abuses of females are accepted. This chauvinistic archetype is based on the idea of man's biological, social, and intellectual superiority over females. Men are thus allowed to engage in pleasures such as chasing women and adultery.

The masked macho is the third and less common archetype of machismo. A masked macho exemplifies a man who uses a mask

of deceit to hide his real intentions. A masked macho often fights for the oppressed. The legendary [Pancho Villa](#) is an example.

The last archetype is the authentic macho, a man who is a responsible husband and father. The authentic macho is seen as a more balanced individual who adheres to honor, respect, strength, dignity, and protection of the family. Focused on earning the respect of family and community, this type is not popularized in literature, legends, or movies.

***Marianismo*: Historical Context**

Machismo and *marianismo* are terms that are linked to the culture in Latin America. *Marianismo* is the female equivalent of machismo and considered to be the embodiment of the feminine. It is characterized by hyperfeminine behavior.

Similar to machismo, *marianismo* is traced back to the time of the Spanish conquest and may have been a reaction to machismo. The roots of *marianismo* also reside in Roman Catholic theology. It is related to all the elements of Marian devotion seen in various cultural patterns in Latin America.

Marian devotion has a long history in colonial New Spain and the independent nation of Mexico. In 1519 [Hernán Cortés](#) arrived in Veracruz under the protection of the Roman Catholic Church and the Virgin Mary. In 1531 Juan Diego had a vision of the [Virgin of Guadalupe](#) at Tepeyac, to the northeast of Mexico City. The Virgin of Guadalupe became the key symbol of Mexican identity in the mid-17th century. Our Lady of Guadalupe was further proclaimed by the church as patroness of Mexico in 1754 and in 1900 proclaimed the patroness of the Americas.

Although historical controversies exist in these accounts, the Virgin Mary played an important role in the Catholic religion and Mexican culture. After almost five centuries of Marian devotion, pilgrimages continue to be important to Mexican culture. Marian devotion is evident in the frequency with which girls are named in honor of the Virgin. In fact, María (with or without an additional name) is the most common baptismal name for women in Mexico, and even men may be called José María.

***Marianismo* and the Virgin Mary**

The *marianismo* ideal is modeled after the image of the Virgin Mary and connotes saintliness and submissiveness. Given the title Mother of God, the Virgin Mary is venerated and admired for being spiritually immaculate and eternally giving. This eventually created a conception of femininity in Mexico and in other Latin American countries—a combination of both a good and a bad woman. This is reflected in the dichotomy of the virgin and the whore.

The basis of the *marianismo* ideal is Mary's acceptance of God's will and her purity (virginity). In Mexico, where *marianismo* is strong, the Virgin Mary symbolizes the good mother in contrast to the bad woman Malinche, who was Cortés's lover.

Marianismo expects women to model themselves after Mary and to accept their roles as mothers and wives. Women should be pure, humble, emotional, kind, compliant, vulnerable, unassertive, and enduring of suffering. Women live in the shadow of their husbands and children and should support them continuously. This kind of attitude involves the expectation that women should tolerate certain behavior of men such as their aggressiveness, sexual infidelity, arrogance, stubbornness, and callousness. The expectations that a woman should be an ideal wife and mother require her to be spiritually superior.

***Marianismo* as a Strategy**

Evelyn Stevens is credited for coining the term *marianismo*. Stevens turned *marianismo* into a strategy whereby women benefit from the ideal of women as semidivine, morally superior, and spiritually stronger than men. The women's movement led to the evolution of *marianismo* into a cult of feminine superiority. The power in *marianismo* comes from women's ability to produce life. By tolerating the husband's behavior and wickedness, women receive validation from society and from God. Men's wickedness, therefore, is the necessary precondition of woman's superior status. This means that to uphold their semidivine status, women should not attempt to avoid suffering and self-sacrifice. Instead, women make this suffering known and thus gain esteem and admiration from society.

On the other hand, *marianismo* as a strategy is criticized by Tracy Ehlers, who criticized Stevens's position on four grounds. First

she criticized the idea that *marianismo* is a companion and complement to machismo. Second, she disagrees with the assumption that women are content with domesticity and the feminine power at home. Third, she points out that the *marianismo* ideal blames women for a man's bad behavior because the women need that behavior to attain their status as wife and mother. Fourth, she argues that the *marianismo* ideal creates a universal model that encompasses all Latin American women.

Changes in the *Marianismo* Ideal

The socialist revolution in Cuba led to changes in the *marianismo* ideals. The Virgin Mary was replaced by the ideal of the equal and working woman.

The Caribbean island of Cuba was a Spanish colony until 1898, but after winning its independence, it became, in practice, a U.S. colony. The Cuban revolution began on January 1, 1959, when the revolutionary leader [Fidel Castro](#) forced the former dictator to leave the country. A few years later, Cuba proclaimed itself a socialist country, accompanying an economic blockade from the United States.

These political changes involve the creation of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) in the early years of the revolution. The organization aimed to fulfill women's rights in line with the revolutionary ideals. Today Cuba is the only country in Latin America with legalized abortion and free contraceptives. The Family Code in 1975 also established by law that men and women have equal responsibility in household work.

The political changes in Cuba regarding gender are still juxtaposed with the traditional gender roles and the prevailing norms of heterosexuality and the nuclear family. The traditional values of women's roles as mothers and wives as concerned with love, marriage, and the family are still present in Cuban socialist society. Women are still responsible for not getting pregnant. This implies that the mixture of machismo culture and radical changes toward socialism and equal rights continue to exist in the Cuban society.

Further Information

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